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THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

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Alike in the Old Testament and in the New—in the sermons of the prophets, the sayings of Jesus, and the letters of the apostles—we hear the note of righteousness—the righteousness of God himself, the righteousness which he requires of men. What does it mean?

Mere formal definitions do not greatly aid us. If it be said: It is the rightness of God, the harmony of his will with his nature, his correspondence with what he ought to be, we have still to ask: What *is* his ethical nature? What does his character require?

The common view of God's righteousness has been that it was a name for the law and penalty side of his nature, in contrast with his mercy or grace—the retributive, vindictory aspect of his character, from which his love is to be sharply distinguished.

But it is quite certain that this is not the biblical conception. The righteousness of God stands in no contrast to his mercy, but rather includes it. There is no such thing as a rivalry in him between punitive justice and forgiving love. Forgiveness and salvation, as well as his just judgments upon sin, flow forth from the divine righteousness. He is "a righteous God *and a Savior*." "Thy righteousness," says the Psalmist, "is like the mountains of God; thy judgments are a great deep; thou *savest* man and beast."

So far is righteousness from denoting an unconditional necessity to punish that it often denotes exactly the contrary. "Deliver me from guilt, O God of my salvation," prays the penitent, "and my tongue shall sing of thy *righteousness*." "Answer me in thy righteousness, and enter not into judgment with thy servant." Here righteousness means exemption from judgment; that is, the exact opposite of the common popular and dogmatic conception of it.

God's righteousness is equitableness. It is seen no less in protecting the innocent than in condemning and punishing the guilty. It is the foe of partiality, cruelty, and oppression. It is absolute

fairness in the treatment of men. If it involves hostility to their wrongs, it involves equally defense of their rights. In righteousness are united graciousness and uprightness, goodness and severity. Jeremiah's description of the character of Jehovah is that he is one who exercises, and delights in, lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.

Such being the Old Testament conception of God's righteousness, it is easy to see what is the nature of a corresponding righteousness in man. Of him the righteous God requires not only that he shall "do justly," but that he shall "love mercy," and the nation which will reflect his character in its administration must, says Isaiah, "relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow."

We note here, throughout these various descriptions and allusions, the firm conviction that the will of God is stable and consistent, incapable of being moved from the strict line of rectitude and fairness by capricious passions on his own part, or by appeals or entreaties on the part of his worshipers. Unlike the deities of other ancient religions, Jehovah has a fixed and changeless moral character. This he will never lower, qualify, or change. In this ethical nature all his purposes and acts are grounded. Hence there can be no arbitrariness, or fickleness, or partiality with him. With him, as the New Testament says, is no variableness, nor shadow cast by turning. His perfections suffer no eclipse. Justice and judgment are the eternal foundation of his throne.

If now, as we have seen, justice and mercy are so closely akin; if, indeed, the righteousness of God includes his grace, then it would naturally include also his disposition to forgive. And we find that it is so. The Israelite appealed to the divine righteousness not only in expressing the consciousness of his sin, but equally in expressing his hope of forgiveness. God is a righteous judge in acquitting—upon appropriate conditions—as well as in punishing the impenitent. The "righteous acts of Jehovah," which Samuel recounts to the people, are the manifestations of his undeserved goodness which he showed to them and to their fathers, notwithstanding their rebellion and sin. "Deliver me in thy righteousness, and save me," is the Psalmist's prayer. He is confident of salvation because God is righteous. He knew well the truth which is still heard resounding

in one of the latest of our New Testament books: "God is righteous—to *forgive*."

And here, too, the righteousness which God requires in men corresponds to that which dwells forever in his own nature. The "righteousness" which is often defined as consisting in the determination to inflict punishment and secure vengeance, is not the righteousness which the Old Testament commends. A man would not be righteous if he were not also benevolent. And yet, we are often told that punitive justice is the supreme excellence, alike in God and in man. This is to ascribe to the God of all grace a character which the prophets would condemn as unworthy to constitute "righteousness" *even in a man*.

When we turn to the letters of Paul, we meet questions of interpretation on which it would be inappropriate to enter here. But if in the mind of the apostle righteousness is, on the one hand, a judicial quality, which must express itself in the condemnation of sin, it is also a gracious quality—a name for the fidelity or trustworthiness of God, his faithfulness to his own nature and promises. What if we are unrighteous, that is, unfaithful to our obligations to God? exclaims the apostle; he will not be unrighteous in return, unfaithful to his gracious will and promise; our failure to keep covenant with him will but set his faithfulness—or, as Paul calls it, his "righteousness"—in the higher relief.

Only once in the gospels is the phrase "righteousness of God" attributed to our Lord, and in that case it denotes, not an attribute of God, but the righteousness which God requires in men: "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness," and of the nature and requirements of that true righteousness the Sermon on the Mount—where this phrase occurs—is the exposition. Once also, it may be added, Jesus is said to have spoken of God's wrath. He saw it illustrated in the woes and tribulations which should overtake the Jewish people at the destruction of their sacred city.

Once in the fourth gospel are the words "Holy Father," and once also the words "O righteous Father," heard on the lips of Jesus in prayer. The context makes their meaning clear. First of all, it is evident that it is the righteousness of a Father to which our Lord alludes, and what does he ask the Father in his righteousness to do?

To guard from evil his disciples: "Holy Father, keep them;" and to sustain by his love those who have learned to recognize the Father in the Son: "Righteous Father, these have learned that thou didst send me; they have known thy name through me; keep them by the power of that love wherewith thou lovest me." The righteousness of God is here the basis of an appeal for all his gracious benefits: "In thy righteousness grant to my disciples thy protecting care and paternal love."

Such are some of the biblical representations of the righteousness of God. But we are not dependent upon such allusions and descriptions for our ideas of the subject. There has lived one in our world in whom the righteousness of God was reflected and interpreted—

In whose life the law appears
Drawn out in living characters.

Why should we not go directly to Christ and learn from him, who alone knew the Father, what are the moral qualities and dispositions of God? Why not find in his life and life-work the test and measure of the various conceptions of God's righteousness which have obtained in Christian thought and teaching?

Had theology pursued this plan, I cannot help thinking that many conceptions of the subject which have been widely accepted, and many of the inferences which have been derived from these conceptions, would never have become current. How would it fare, for example, with that idea of the righteousness of God which makes it to consist in the sacred honor of a private dignitary who takes offense at sin and must have reparation? Did Jesus represent God in terms of sovereignty and chivalry and codes of honor? Did he conceive God's attitude toward the sinner as that of offended dignity demanding satisfaction, or as that of an enraged creditor clamoring for the settlement of back debts?

Who would not feel the incongruity of attributing to Jesus the conception of God's righteousness as consisting in an unconditional necessity to punish—together with the corollary that this punitive justice is the primary attribute, the most fundamental quality in the character of God? Certain it is that such ideas, which have been so widely influential in Christian theology, were never derived from Jesus in the first instance; to me it seems equally evident that they

cannot be harmonized with his conception and consciousness of God. They are more probably to be explained by the influence of feudalism and of Roman and Germanic law. But these sources yield religious ideas foreign, and often radically contrary, to the Christian faith. It cannot be too urgently insisted that the Christian conception of God is, primarily, Christ's conception.

Nor does the idea of God's righteousness as being primarily retributive, accord better with the apostolic idea of God. We do not read in the Johannine writings: "God is punitive justice, and he who is similarly determined to punish, dwelleth in God and knoweth God." Nor does Paul's description of what is highest in man, because most Godlike, run thus: "Though I speak with tongues, and know all mysteries and have all faith, but have not an uncompromising determination to punish, I am nothing. And now abideth faith, hope, and retributive righteousness—these three, and the greatest of these is retributive righteousness."

But what is the idea of God's righteousness which shines out in the life of Jesus, and how does he illustrate and enforce it? We must find our answer in our Lord's own character which is to us the human transcript and interpretation of the character of God. What attitude did "Jesus Christ, the righteous," take up toward sin and sinners?

It is evident, in the first place, that he keenly discerned and exposed the sins of men and turned upon them the revealing light of holiness and truth. With what a piercing glance did he penetrate to the lurking selfishness in the thoughts of men! He could detect the taint of hypocrisy in the prayers of the self-righteous, the intolerance which often underlay religious zeal, the envy and meanness which sought to cloak themselves in an ostentatious generosity. In the presence of Jesus Christ sin stands exposed in all its heinousness and hatefulness—plain, unmistakable, false, it stands revealed in the white light of his radiant holiness, and because revealed condemned.

Law, righteousness, purity—does he not know and illustrate what these are? They are the very breath of his own inner life. They are enthroned in his every thought. They preside over his every act. Here is one who knows sin as no other ever knew it—

who judges it as God judges. His eye discerns its blighting, soul-destroying power. He sees it black against the pure radiance of the eternal love.

Now, what effect did this vision of sin have upon Christ? Did he turn away in mingled indignation and loathing? Did he summon forthwith the penalties of retributive justice? Did he cry: "Here is an insult to heaven which demands reparation? Here is an infinite evil which calls for an infinite punishment?" On the contrary we find that Jesus displayed toward men, even the worst and wickedest of them, a feeling so singularly fraternal that he has won for himself the peerless title of the Brother of mankind. Despite all this sin which his heart deplored and his purity condemned, his great, holy love yearned for these sinners and refused to despair of winning them.

Here is the divine peculiarity—the strange, transcendent wonder of Christ. To him nothing truly human was alien and the human still lived—even if it only smouldered—in the ashes of a seemingly ruined life. He was one whose righteousness displayed itself, not in fury and penal woes, but in a divine, consuming passion for men's recovery. His holiness did not remove him from other men, but drew him to them and made him one with them. His purity came into our world, not to blast, but to purify. His ideal of Godlikeness was found in service and self-giving. His holiness stoops to conquer, and he knows that even human malignity must, at last, break itself upon his divine patience. His perfection finds its chief expression in ministering, in being servant of all, in giving his life a ransom for many. Jesus knew that in all this he was doing the will and illustrating the nature of God. It was because he knew that he came forth from God and was going again to God, that he took a towel and girded himself for the service of men.

Such was the attitude toward sin and sinners of him who interprets God out of his own intimate and incomparable knowledge and fellowship. Is not his revelation true to the prophetic word: "A righteous God *and a Savior*"? Not, be it observed, a Savior notwithstanding the fact that he is a righteous God, but a God who saves just because he is righteous—who would not be true to himself, who would not be just to his own perfection, if he were not a Savior.

Is it not plain that through Jesus Christ there speaks to us, and to all mankind, a God who answers perfectly the prophet's description: "I that speak *in righteousness, mighty to save*"?

The righteousness of God which Jesus reveals includes, at once, the divine self-assertion or respect and the divine disposition to save. Why should these be separated and contrasted? Each is necessary to the other. If God were indifferent to sin, if he did not repudiate and condemn it, there could be no motive to salvation. Sin would be disregarded, passed over, condoned. But a God who will save must be a righteous God. To him sin is hateful; it is an intruder, a foreign element in his world. Therefore all the resources of the divine wisdom and love must be employed for its eradication. Yes, he who comes forth from God to seek and to save the lost will be, must be, above all things the messenger and representative of the divine righteousness. It has not been sufficiently considered that the very *idea* of a real moral salvation, of a recovery of the lives of men into harmony with God, is possible only because God is essentially holy, and is itself an expression and proof of his righteousness.

Christ brings to men a stern message concerning sin. He will make no compromise with moral evil. His attitude toward it is not that of easy-going good nature. His salvation is from sin *to holiness*. The righteousness of God is satisfied with nothing less than a Godlike life. The all-inclusive requirement is that men become sons of their Father; that is, morally kindred to him in their spirit and action. No requirement could so voice the divine righteousness as this, that salvation is Godlikeness.

Hence salvation is no mere fiat, or decree, or other formality, but recovery from sinning. In order to be saved, sin must be repented of, repudiated, and forgiven. Righteousness demands not merely more correct opinions, however true or important, nor any mere passive acquiescence in some act done on our behalf; such views make salvation too easy. Men are not saved by any mere theory about Christ, his life or his death, but—to use the bold and realistic language of Paul—they are saved by dying to sin with Christ on his cross, being buried with him out of sight of the sinful world and rising with him into the heights of his own holiness. We must repeat the life of Christ in ourselves; take up the cross of service and self-giving

and follow after him; make ourselves at home in his world; learn something in experience of what Paul meant when he said: "For me to live is Christ"—that is a real salvation; that is the righteous life in the eyes of God.

What a manifestation of the righteousness of God is seen in the fact that Jesus consecrated himself in life and in death to procure our actual moral deliverance from evil! It is the whole saving work of Christ in teaching and labor, in suffering and death, which reveals and attests the holiness of God, and the verdict of that holiness upon sin is this, that it can never be forgotten or overlooked, but must be repented of, forsaken, and forgiven.

All that Christ does for men, in teaching, labor, and suffering, is done for them because sin is an evil and accursed thing, separating them from fellowship with God and their own true destiny. And when, to win men from sin to holiness, he enters into deepest sympathy with them, bears their woes upon his compassionate heart, and endures the most bitter griefs and tortures in his anxieties and labors to bring them to God—then those sufferings with and for them become the supreme revelation of his estimate of sin. The cross shows what holy love will do to save men from sin. It is therefore the truest measure of sin's evil and the symbol of God's estimate of it. The blood of Christ seals God's condemnation of sin and proclaims the supremacy of that saving righteousness which will stop at no labor or suffering in order that men may be recovered to harmony with itself.

God condemns sin most of all in the very act of saving men from it. God makes manifest his righteousness in Christ, not by the infliction of penal or quasi-penal suffering, but by his own divine self-sacrifice and passion in consequence of sin. How does a mother make manifest her estimate of the evil of a reprobate son's course of life? By insisting upon his imprisonment? By punishing one of her other children? Or by her deep sympathy and sadness, her prayers and tears, her loving labors and entreaties—by the Gethsemane of her mother's heart?

By his vicarious suffering with and for sinners Christ has condemned sin and exalted righteousness. Would you see what sin is? Look on the cross! See how sin regarded and treated incarnate love.

Would you learn what righteousness is? Look again on the cross! See what holy love will do and suffer to raise men out of the curse of sin into harmony with itself.

Here, for my mind and heart, lies the holy mystery of Christ's cross and passion. Hence the cross is the symbol of the most precious truths of our faith. It summarizes what is central in the saving work of Christ, because it expresses what is supreme in the bosom of eternal Love. God forbid that we should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!